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AUTHOR	Haiplik, Brenda
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ABSTRACT

BRAC (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), the largest Indigenous nongovernmental organization in the world, has a unique teacher training program in rural Bangladesh. Almost all BRAC teacher-trainees are rural women, who must have completed at least 9 years of schooling. Trainees spend only 12 days in initial basic teacher training before commencing their teaching duties in a first-grade, multi-age classroom. With monthly refresher courses and continuous close supervision by BRAC education program field staff, these paraprofessionals deliver a primary education that has been found to equal or surpass the education provided by the formal government-funded primary system. In 1999, the program operated more than 35,000 schools in over one quarter of Bangladeshi villages, serving the poorest rural children untouched by the formal system. This paper describes program elements in detail, compares them to features of the government system, and suggests possible reasons for BRAC's success. The elements described include: teacher characteristics and selection, initial basic training, school orientation for new teachers, monthly refresher training, "batch" teachers (local teachers who help facilitate monthly training sessions), workshops and ongoing training, organization of BRAC classrooms, "program organizers" (frontline teacher support staff), and senior support staff (managerial and pedagogical). Compared to government teachers, BRAC teachers have less formal education, but their training offers much more practical exposure and they are better supervised. (SV)

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Panel Paper (Summary): BRAC's Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) Teacher Training Program

Brenda Haiplik
bhaiplik@oise.utoronto.ca
Ph.D. Candidate, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

Paper Abstract

BRAC, the largest indigenous non-governmental organization (NGO) in the world, has a unique teacher training program. BRAC teachers, about 98% of whom are female, spend only twelve days in initial basic teacher training before commencing their teaching duties in a grade one level, multi-age classroom. With monthly refresher courses and continuous close supervision by BRAC Education Program (BEP) field staff these paraprofessionals help their students experience a primary education that has been found to be as good as, if not better than, the formal government primary system. How does this teacher training program work? Why are BRAC teachers learning so quickly and so well?

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BRAC's Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) Teacher Training Program

The following summary paper is based on both a literature review and on the preliminary research findings collected by the researcher in Bangladesh between April and December 2002. This information about BRAC's Non-Formal Primary Education Program (NFPE), specifically its teacher training system, contributes to a growing body of knowledge being assembled by a large team of OISE/UT students and faculty who are interested in successful alternative forms of both formal and non-formal primary education in the developing world. 'Developing world' is defined as the non-industrial or semi-industrial, poorer nations of the world, ranked by the World Bank as low or middle income.

Introduction

Educational initiatives in emerging nations have generally been unsuccessful in producing desired educational outcomes. Many variables including unpredictable political, economic, technological and social factors have come into play. In recent years, however, scholars have noted that there are some innovative programs which have produced, and continue to produce, encouraging and impressive results. These programs have broken away from rigid, conventional ways of managing education. They have succeeded with very limited resources in environments which are generally not regarded as being very conducive to innovation. Innovators realize that a comprehensive 'blueprint' is often inappropriate for managing people-centered educational reforms. Thus, studying successful community schools that reach children of populations thought to be the hardest to reach and hardest to teach may provide clues about how basic education can be attained in developing nations of the 21st century.

Teacher development plays a central role in this attainment. Governments and donor agencies continue to have a very unclear grasp of the factors that contribute to the improvement of teaching. Reasons for this lack of clarity include: the limited research on teaching, teachers and their training, the need to synthesize the research that has been done and to analyze the critical factors that make a difference in education (Farrell and Oliveira, 1993; Rust and Dalin, 1990). In nations around the world there is a need to improve both the quality of teaching and research on teachers and their training and development.

In my doctoral studies, I am investigating the pivotal role played by teachers in community education. BRAC's Non-Formal Primary Education Program provides the setting. BRAC has developed some of the best-known and most effective strategies for addressing education problems of poor and/or rural communities, specifically targeting females, showing that poverty and gender are not insurmountable obstacles to primary education. BRAC's work in non-formal schools proves that paraprofessional teachers who are carefully yet quickly trained can be effective.

BRAC

In 1985 BRAC began a primary education program with 22 schools. This initiative came as a response to requests from rural parents, who had themselves taken part in BRAC's functional education programs, to improve the education of their children. The objective was to develop a replicable primary education model which could provide, in a short period, basic literacy and numeracy to the poorest rural children untouched by the formal school system (Lovell and Fatema, 1989, 7). Girls were identified and targeted as being the most in need. By 1989, the program had expanded to 2,500 schools. In 1999, the program operated more than 35,000 schools in more than one quarter of rural Bangladeshi villages (Nath, 1999, 8). At present, approximately 2.4 million children have graduated from all of BRAC's primary education programs, 1,618,273 from the NFPE system alone, 66.8% being girls. There are currently 34,000 schools in operation and a further 1,200 will be opening in 2003 to accommodate ethnic minority children (BRAC BEP, 2002).

More than 90% of students who start in BRAC schools graduate and a large proportion of these graduates are admitted to grade four or higher in the government school system (Sharafuddin, 2001, 2). Effective management is the key to BRAC's success. BRAC has been able to undertake substantial and varied programs, including its current Education for Indigenous Children (EIC) initiative, and to scale up rapidly while all the while maintaining both effectiveness and efficiency. BRAC's current mandate remains to provide primary education at the grassroots level to the poorest children in most villages of the country, thereby strengthening and supplementing the universal primary education program of the government. BRAC has thus provided a second chance to deprived, out-of-school children to complete primary education.

Understanding How BRAC's NFPE Teacher Training System Works

BRAC Teachers

BRAC teachers are chosen from among the more educated in the village and are usually between twenty and thirty-five years of age. A person selected to be trained as a BRAC teacher must have completed nine or more years of schooling, preferably be married, and have the support of the community. Preference is given to women who make up the majority (approximately 98%) of the teaching force. Teachers are hired on a temporary, part-time basis. Teacher selection occurs through an interview process conducted by BRAC's field staff in a BRAC field office near the village. The applicant is asked to complete a series of tasks including reading a newspaper aloud, writing on the blackboard, completing simple mathematical equations, writing an address on an envelope and conversing with the interview committee. Good basic literacy and numeracy, strong common sense, presence, ability to articulate, and interest in children are attributes desired in potential BRAC teachers (Lovell and Fatema, 1989, 13).

Teachers receive a small monthly stipend, about 600 Taka per month (about US $ 12) the first year, 650 Taka the second year, and so on. Teachers are rewarded for their years of service by an increasing salary. This stipend can be compared to the monthly salaries of government teachers which average about 1,500 Taka per month (2002). There is very limited paid work available for women in the villages and

employment as a BRAC teacher thus gives women a small, regular, year-round income and respected status in the community. Teacher performance is monitored closely with the school setting being highly structured and closely supervised by BRAC's Program Organizers and by parents. There is very little absenteeism among the teachers and the dropout rate is also very low. BRAC teachers were shown to demonstrate greater motivation towards their jobs and therefore to dropout of their jobs at reduced rates compared to government school teachers (Sarker, 1994, 9).

Teacher Training

Decentralized, continuous training for paraprofessional teachers and their field support staff who both manage and provide pedagogical assistance to teachers at the local level is a key element that makes the BRAC NFPE model work so well. The teacher training methods used by BRAC are continuously being developed over time through trial and error. Training begins even before a new teacher arrives at one of BRAC's residential training centers. New recruits spend from three to six days observing a BRAC teacher in their region. This helps the novice teacher understand how a BRAC school works, what her responsibilities will be and offers her a chance to discuss any concerns with an experienced teacher. By the time recruits arrive at basic training they have a good sense of what the BRAC NFPE program is all about, making concepts and ideas easier to learn and remember during the initial training period.

Basic Training

The initial twelve days of teacher training emphasize basic concepts of learning theory and practice teaching. The content of the training includes: child psychology, educational psychology, classroom discipline, relationship development with parents, pedagogy, use of books and teaching aids and organization of co-curricular activities. The first five days are spent on concepts and the remaining seven days on role-playing as teachers learn how to prepare lesson plans. Teachers are trained in groups of 20 to 25. This intensive residential training is structured, learner-centered and participatory, designed to allow the teachers to experience the kind of learning that they will be facilitating in the classroom (Lovell and Fatema, 1989, 15). Teachers are taught that comprehension rather than memorization is stressed in BRAC schools. This is very different from the traditional methodology of rote learning and memorization that teachers themselves experienced as students.

The 12 day course is heavy on practice and lighter on theory, unlike traditional teacher training programs both in Bangladesh and around the developing and developed worlds. Basic training is an extremely effective, intense course that 'opens up' rural housewives and allows them to begin their journey into becoming teachers. Theory and practice come together in an appropriate way. The trainers are gentle, experienced men and women who are familiar with the NFPE program and give special attention to young, nervous rural housewives away from home for the first time. Basic training is practical, hands-on and enjoyable. Trainers bring quiet young women out of their shells.

New Grade Orientation Training

Before a teacher begins teaching in her school a five or six day orientation training is also held just before the school opens. This intense course allows field staff to review all information covered during

basic training with new teachers and to give additional grade one level curricular information to get teachers through their first month. In addition to this, on opening day the new teacher is not alone in her classroom. Her direct supervisor, a BRAC BEP program organizer will be there along with parents and supportive community members. The teacher is encouraged by the entire community to begin her new post. Again, this varies greatly from what most teachers around the world face on day one in the classroom. A teacher in North America is generally alone with her or his students making the first real life teaching experience an often terrifying one.

Monthly Refresher Training

Every month all BRAC teachers attend continuing teacher training refresher courses for one or two days. Teachers meet in clusters by grade/year level making the training relevant to everyone and very efficient. When BRAC introduced grades four and five into its program (2001) grades four and five level teachers complained that they were having trouble understanding the more challenging curriculum they were to teach. BRAC staff decided to offer two day refresher courses for these upper level teachers. Grades one to three teachers currently receive only one day of refresher training per month.

In this researcher's opinion, monthly refresher training is a 'teacher oasis'. It is a crucial element and probably the most important component of the NFPE teacher training/development program. Refreshers are an excellent example of needs-based training/programming. Every month, a cluster group of teachers (about 16) meet at their local field office in a training room that looks just like their own classrooms- colorful, familiar and inviting. Teachers sit on mats on the floor in a U shape, just like their students do. This familiar classroom environment allows teachers to imagine themselves in their own teaching and learning environments and to see what techniques discussed could potentially work with students. BTs and their Program Organizers (POs), and/or Master Trainers (MTs), Resource Teachers (RTs) and Quality Managers (QMs) discuss with teachers the problems encountered in the previous month and the curriculum to be taught in the upcoming month. Practice of teaching lessons, co-curricular songs and dances and general discussion amongst teachers promotes confidence building, sharing and collaboration amongst teachers and their supervisors. In addition, sometimes an experienced teacher from one village will visit a teacher in a neighbouring village to assist with problems after a refresher course.

The monthly refresher is one venue where teachers can directly talk to teachers, take risks sharing information with each other that they might not be comfortable sharing with their POs. During snack and meal times POs make sure that they leave teachers on their own. This limited time is when real teacher-to-teacher sharing occurs. The monthly refresher is a familiar, comfortable environment for teachers where motivation can be refueled.

Batch Teachers/Trainers (BTs)

Batch Teachers/Trainers (BTs) are probably the most important support staff for teachers and they are the direct link between the teaching cadre and BRAC's managerial staff. BTs share and understand the day-to-day lived experiences of BRAC teachers as they are teachers themselves with classrooms of their own. BTs are experienced (have taught at least one school cycle), talented teachers who have been

identified as teacher trainers at the local, cluster level. BTs help POs run monthly refresher training in up to two subject areas as well as conduct their own classrooms. BTs are the essential link between theory and practice. Their role in the BEP system is vital. In a group of 16 teachers there can be 2 to 3 BTs. In this researcher's opinion, BTs are a major reason for the success of both BRAC's strong teacher training system and its NFPE model.

Workshops and Ongoing Training

As BEP programming is needs-based special workshops and ongoing training opportunities are often organized for teachers and field support staff. One example of this is the August 3-4, 2002 workshop at the Savar Training and Resource Center near Dhaka. A two day workshop was held to tackle the challenging issues facing BRAC as it tries to develop and implement it's latest initiative, Education for Indigenous Children (EIC). 25 top Batch Trainers (BTs), Bengali and indigenous, met to discuss problems, develop curriculum and collaborate. A draft of a multilingual indigenous dictionary was compiled, as were big book story ideas. This session proved what BRAC already knows that strong, sensitive Bengali teachers can make effective teachers of indigenous children and that, ideally, more indigenous teachers are needed in ethnic minority villages where BRAC works. The workshop also motivated talented teachers to continue their good work and to go back to their regions of the country and promote BRAC's EIC initiative.

Classroom Organization

The organization of BRAC classrooms makes a teacher's job easier. Students are divided into small groups of four or five. Each group has a rotating leader. A group leader is like a mini teacher. Thus, a BRAC classroom has at least five teachers. Group leaders help the teacher both manage the class and offer peer support to weaker students. This is a very effective teaching and learning strategy. Those who teach learn the material well while helping weaker students to improve in both self-esteem and academic performance.

Management and Supervision of BRAC Teachers

"Unfortunately, management has often been a neglected dimension in explorations of development programs in the Third World (Lovell, 1992, 117)". BRAC's strong decentralized management structure is a major strength of the BEP program and a key reason explaining why BRAC teachers learn so quickly and so well. Management and supervision of BRAC schools is accomplished through a structure including an experienced Head Office managerial and pedagogical staff, a system of regional managers (RMs), quality managers (QMs), program organizers (POs) and monitors who analyze and follow up on field reports. Regional managers supervise the field staff. Program Organizers, directly supervise the teachers and serve as the link between BRAC and parent groups. Generally, each PO is responsible for about fifteen schools.

Program Organizers: Frontline Teacher Support Staff

The POs are the frontline supervisors of the teachers and the schools. The POs receive at least five days of initial training in effective supervision, and they must attend the 12-day basic teacher-training course along with the teachers. In addition, they must attend the two-week training-of-trainers workshops required of all teacher-trainers. Just like teachers attend monthly refresher courses, POs attend weekly PO

meetings at their base field office. These regular gatherings allow POs to share their experiences in the field; what works and what does not work in the schools, how to solve problems (pedagogic or managerial), trouble shooting for the future in all areas and detailed subject-based module/lesson planning. The job of POs is to supervise and assist the teachers and to work with the parent groups. They attend and report on monthly parent meetings and conduct monthly teacher training sessions. POs must visit every school in their district as often as possible and not less than twice a week. Evaluation studies have shown that where the POs are weak the schools are likely to be weak as well (Lovell and Fatema, 1989, 29).

POs hold university level degrees but do not usually have any formal teaching and learning experience. How then can they be effective teacher supervisors? Perhaps the teaching-learning information that POs gradually gain while in the field working directly with teachers is more important than their initially limited pedagogic ability. The researcher observed that teachers, in fact, support and 'teach' their supervisory staff. Each time a PO enters a new school or monthly refresher training session he/she has the opportunity to observe another teacher in action. The PO collects valuable teaching and learning information, which he or she might not have in terms of formal teaching experience, from each school and teacher he/she visits. In this way, good and bad teaching and learning practices accumulate and the PO can distinguish what works and what does not and pass this information on to other POs and teachers in his or her region. Information dissemination is thus a natural result of PO movement from school to school in the field. Valuable information about teaching and learning collected in this diffusive manner is then passed on to other support and administrative staff. Good ideas often arrive from the teacher/classroom level via the POs, Quality Managers and Regional Managers to Head Office where policy is made. In addition to this field staff transference of information Head Office BEP staff make frequent visits to schools and field offices to see for themselves what is working and not working in the BRAC classroom.

Whether a PO is male or female does not seem to make much of a difference. A sensitive, gentle male PO can have a strong, comfortable relationship with the female teachers he supervises. This is an important statement since Bangladeshi society is based on a patriarchal, hierarchical system where women are situated below men. For BRAC to able to foster positive working relationships between men and women in the conservative, rural areas of the country is a great achievement.

Senior Support Staff for Teachers (Managerial and Pedagogical)

Master Trainers (MTs), Resource Teachers (RTs), Team-in-Charges (TICs), Quality Managers (QMs) and Regional Managers (RMs) make up senior teacher supervisors and trainers (above the basic Program Organizer level) in the BRAC teacher training model. All of these staff are experienced supervisors and offer subject-based and pedagogical support to teachers as well as participate in monthly refresher courses. Quality Managers are the most senior members in the teacher support cadre of personnel. They are directly responsible for the pedagogical development of teachers and other field support staff. Regional Managers have been POs themselves but focus on administrative and managerial aspects of running the BEP program at the regional level.

Comparison Between BRAC and the Formal Government Primary Teacher Training Systems

It is worth comparing the differences of the BRAC and formal government primary teacher training systems.

BRAC:

- Teachers have SSC (grade nine in North America) or HSC (grade ten in North America) formal education
- Teachers visit a BRAC school in their area for a minimum of 3 days to observe how a BRAC school works before attending the basic training course
- Teachers attend an intensive 12 day pre-service training course
- Teachers have constant supervision and support- minimum 2 out of 6 day weekly visits from POs (BTs, POs, RTs, QMs, etc.)
- Participatory monthly refresher training (BT/teacher-led, needs-based)
- New grade level 5-6 day orientation workshops prior to new grade commencement
- All training is heavy on practice, light on theory (hands-on, participatory, needs-based training)

Government Primary System:

- Teachers have an advanced degree (BA), post secondary level formal education
- Teachers begin teaching as soon as they are hired without any pre-service training
- Within the first year of service teachers attend a one year Certificate-in-Education in-service course at a Primary Teacher Training Institute
- Teachers have limited and sporadic supervision- teachers are isolated (Head Teachers, inspectors)
- A refresher course after three months (Instructor-led, not necessarily needs-based)
- Training is heavy on theory and light on practice (theoretical, instructor-led and determined training)

Based on these distinct differences it is no wonder that the BRAC system is so much more successful than the mainstream government system of teacher training. BRAC is currently trying to develop a formal, working relationship with the Government of Bangladesh in order to share ideas and success stories, the goal being to help Bangladesh reach the Education For All goal by 2015.

Concluding Remarks

Several key themes related to BRAC's success in its NFPE program, with a specific emphasis on its teacher training system, were identified during the field work experience including:

- a needs-based model
- intense and continuous teacher supervision
- efficient use of training time
- flexibility, trial and error and experimentation in program planning, implementation, evaluation and restructuring
- continuous movement and constant growth and innovation

- a constant, multi-directional feedback system from the classroom and community level to the Head Office level
- accountability and responsibility at all levels
- sustainability in all program areas especially teacher training and development
- language as the heart of a culture and of one's identity
- everyone is a teacher and a learner.

These themes offer a glimpse into why BRAC's teacher training system works so well. Other NGOs in Bangladesh, along with the formal government primary system, as well as international educationalists can learn a lot from BRAC's successful teacher training system.

The Bottom Line:

Ongoing, critical evaluation of the BRAC NFPE model from both BRAC itself and outside researchers and interested parties, especially in regards to teacher training, is essential. There is so much to learn from the BRAC NFPE system. Upon closer examination one realizes that the BRAC school could include more child-friendly, creative curriculum and it could allow the teacher more creative expression and control over teaching and learning. However, we must remember that, like in all educational systems around the world, in spite of there being definite areas requiring improvement, children are coming to BRAC schools and they are learning. BRAC teachers are being hired, trained efficiently and teaching successfully, often producing student achievement results that are as good as if not better than their government school cohorts.

The BRAC NFPE model, along with its vital teacher training component, is changing the lives of some of the poorest, hardest to reach girl children in the world. Is this not the ultimate goal of education and learning? The model IS working and it is working well. Continuous development of the NFPE model based on the needs of all stakeholders in the communities in which BRAC works can only serve to allow BRAC to reflect on its current NFPE model and work towards the creation of an even stronger one. Successful innovations in education should be celebrated and supported.

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